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THE FATE FORETOLD

It was the dead of night—out of doors all was calm and still—the full moon shining from a sky of deepest blue—and not even the faint tinkle of a distant sheep bell, to speak of life or motion—not even the hoarse bark of a watch dog to disturb the listening air. But then it was nearly twelve o'clock, and the good people of L——were sleeping soundly after their day's work—the young [illegible] delightful Sunday night which is always sure to bring moonlit rambles through shaded roads in summer, or quiet groupings reund blazing fires in winter—and words of love and tender looks—and '*him*'—which is best of all.

I have said that all were sleeping quietly but I was wrong. A bright light shone through the windows of Farmer Thomson's kitchen—a bright light glowed and danced from the blazing hearth within to the walls and back again. Gathered close around the fire—for though summer was advancing the nights were cold—were four young girls—the farmer's three daughters—Emily, Nancy and Eunice, and their cousin Helen who had been spending the winter in the city. It was in honor of her return that they were allowed to sit up so long after the family had retired—and they talked as only young girls can talk, under such circumstances.

'And so you have come back to us quite heart-whole,' said Emily Thomson, looking roguishly into her cousin's pretty face.

'Quite. I told you I should,' said Helen carelessly.

'Oh. I saw John Moore at the post office yesterday, and he asked when you were coming home,' said Eunice, looking up suddenly—and there was a general smile, while the color deepened on Helen's cheek, and flushed her forehead.

'John is very handsome,' remarked Nancy, 'and his farm is the best in the county. He is a good match for somebody.—By the way, I wonder how he happened to have letters from New York every week this spring. Did you meet any one there who knew him, Helen?'

'No one,' said Helen, quietly. 'And I suppose I may as well tell you that the letters were from me.'

'What made him ask you, then, when you were coming?' blurted out Eunice, who was rather too young to understand all the 'ins and outs' of a lover's behavior. 'He ought to be ashamed of himself, and I will tell him so the very next time I see him.'

'Do,' said Helen, laughing. And then she began to stir the fire and gaze into the coals as if she saw a picture there. By-and-by she looked up.

'Emily, are you sleepy!!

'No, indeed.'

'Nor you, Nancy, nor you, Eunice?'

No, they had not thought of going to bed and provided they talked low so that their father did not hear them and come out to send them away, they intended to sit up a good while longer.

Then sit closer, girls for I have something to tell you. They obeyed, with that comfortable feeling we all know, when we are snugly settled and about to hear a secret.

'Are you afraid of ghosts!' said Helen suddenly after poking the fire for a time.

'*Me*!' Helen. What a question!' said Eunice starting in her seat. But her sisters sat firm, and said they were not.

'When I was in New York,' said Helen, in a whisper, 'I went one night to a party, a little out in the country. We staid rather late—later than this. But between eleven and twelve, we began to talk about ghosts and fortune-telling and one thing and another. One girl was saying how she had melted lead and poured it into cold water to see what her fortune would be. It came into the shape of a pair of scissors as plain as could be—and the very next week she met a master tailor—and when I saw her, she was engaged to him.'

'Bless *me*!' said Eunice, who was listening with open mouth on her stool in the corner of the hearth.

'Yes. And another girl went to an empty house and threw in a ball of yarn, and said 'Who catches?' And some one took hold of the ball and said—'James Smith.' She met a man by that name soon afterward—they were married the week before the party.'

'Good gracious!' exclaimed the three girls at a breath.

'But the queerest thing of all, was this.' said Helen, leaning over and resting her elbow on Emily's lap. 'One girl wanted to know what was going to happen to her—so she took a looking glass and candle and went down the cellar stairs backward.'

Eunice looked fearfully over her shoulder at the cellar door.

'At the dead of night—at midnight—'

'Ugh. How could she?'

'And she saw a man riding towards her on a white horse——'

'In the looking glass.'

'In the looking glass. He had a plumed hat on and a sword by his side. Now what do you think that meant.'

'What. Tell us what?'

'She was engaged to a young farmer, then—but the match was broken off soon after—I don't know why. She went to the city to spend the winter, and a colonel in the army fell in love with her and married her!'

'You didn't see *her* at the party, did you, child. Her husband is a general very rich, and they live in Washington—at least while there is no war. And she rides in her own carriage, and keeps ever so many black servants, and goes to the President's levees.'

'Dear me—I should like of all things to look into the glass,' sighed Emily.

Her cousin turned round and looked at the eight day clock, so suddenly, that they all jumped.

'And what is to hinder you? It is just five minutes to twelve. Will you try it?'

'Must I go alone?'

'Quite alone. And as you go down hold the candle in front of the glass and look in. You will be sure to see something.'

'No—I dare not,' said Emily, shrinking back.

'It's a tempting of Providence,' said Nancy, who was a bit of a deaconess. 'I will have nothing at all to do with it. I should expect to see something with horns and hoofs looking over my shoulder.'

'Nonsense!' said Helen, though she turned rather pale. 'And you, Eunice?'

'Oh, I should never dare to try—dont ask me,' said the child hiding her face in her apron.

'Well, I will try my luck, at all events; and perhaps I shall see another colonel, maybe a general, or the President himself; who knows?'

She took a candle from the table, and a small looking-glass from the wall. Eunice began to whimper in her apron, and Nancy looked very uneasy.

'Helen, don't do it. It is really wrong, and you will be sure to get frightened dreadfully.'

'And that dark old cellar!' said Emily, shuddering. 'I would not do it for all the generals on earth. Stay here, Helen, and I will tell you your fortune. You will marry John Moore and go live on the Home Farm. You will have six children—three boys and three girls—and die at the good old age of a hundred, universally regretted.'

'No, that does not suit me exactly,' said Helen, smiling. 'I must see if I cannot find my general. See, the clock is on the stroke. By good rights the room ought to be empty; but, as you are here, stay: only go farther away from the cellar, out towards the garden windows.'

She opened the cellar door softly, the first stroke of the clock sounding as it creaked upon its hinges. One glance at the deep blackness of the place, and the girls were only too glad to hurry across the room, and seat themselves in its farthest corner.—Helen stood by the door, waiting till the clock finished striking, and then prepared to descend. They saw her laughing face turned towards them a moment, then she raised the glass between them and went down. The spectators sat mute and anxious, watching the gleam of the candle as it dipped lower and lower, and at last went out of sight. The cold moonlight outside made the landscape look dreary; the glowing brands on the hearth threw deep lights and shadows across the room; there was no sound except the ticking of the eight day clock, the audible beating of their own hearts, and the hysteric sobbing of little Eunice, who was afraid that something would come up out of the cellar and frighten them all to death. The clock gave a great 'click,'—the hands had passed the five minute mark, and yet there was no sign of Helen. The two elder girls looked fearfully at each other.

'Hush, Eunice!' said Emily; and her whisper, low as it was, startled them all unaccountably. 'You will wake father and mother, if you don't mind, and then we shall be in a fine scrape.'

'But where can Helen be?' said Nancy, timidly. 'I think we had better go and look into the cellar. She may have got frightened.'

'Yes,' said Emily, rising; though Eunice clung to her skirts and begged them not to leave her. Before they had crossed the room, however, the stairs creaked, and they started back. Helen was coming up. The candle shone over a face so ghastly and altered—it was if her ghost had taken her place, or rather her corpse, dressed in the clothes she always wore. They sprang to meet her. Emily took away the looking-glass and candle, and Nancy shut the cellar-door, without daring to look down. Eunice seemed a little more at ease when it was closed, and going up to Helen, who was lying back in an arm-chair, with her eyes closed, took her hand and said;

'What did you see, Helen? What makes you look so pale?'

The blue eyes unclosed, but no color came to the lips or cheek.

'What did I see! Why, my own face in the glass, of course child,' she said, glancing cautiously towards the other girls.—'We were fools for thinking anything else would come. Still I would not advise you to try the plan, Eunice.'

'Oh, you may be very sure I never do it,' said Eunice, with [illegible]

'It was quite enough to watch [illegible] and I was so frightened, I cried all the [illegible] And you really did not see anything, Helen?'

'What an unbelieving heathen you are! Must I take an oath—' she stopped short—then yawned, and turned towards the clock again.

'A quarter past twelve. My aunt would be out of her mind if she knew we were up so late. Is the fire quite safe, Emily?'

'Quite,' said her cousin, who had hardly taken her eyes from Helen's face since she rejoined them.

'Then we ought to go to bed. I am sure you are all sleepy enough. Eunice take hold of my hand, if you like, as you go by that cellar door—but I assure you—there are no ghosts there.'

They stole out through the entry and up the stairs as slowly as possible. Eunice and Nancy shared one room—Emily and Helen were to sleep in another just opposite, but they waited, talking under their breath, till the others were in bed, having brought but one candle from the kitchen. When the door of their own apartment closed behind them, Helen's first movement was to put out the candle and draw up the curtain. The moonlight streamed into the room, making it as light as day. Emily looked at her inquiringly.

'If you knew what I had seen in that candle, you would not wonder that I can not bear to have it burn,' she said slowly. They both undressed in silence, and knelt down to say their night prayers, Helen was much longer over hers than usual. When she got into bed at last, and laid her head down on the pillow, Emily said, quietly:

'What did you see, Helen?'

[illegible] Eunice are not to know. I saw John coming towards me looking so well and happy, and just before we met there was a grave between us.'

'Go on,' said Emily.

'My name was on the stone,' said Helen, in a low voice—'and the date was this very year!'

There was a long silence.

'It is nothing,' said Emily, at last. 'You were nervous and frightened before you went down there, and I only wonder you did not see something a great deal worse. I know I should.'

'Then you don't thing it was a [illegible]?' said Helen, in a voice so anxious that it betrayed what she had been feeling.

'The idea! Don't let a piece of folly like that keep you awake, or I'll tell John Moore of it the next time I see him. Good night.'

'Good night,' Helen turned upon her pillow with a heart suddenly grown light, and soon slept soundly. But Emily remained awake a long, long time looking out from the window at the head of the bed at the moonlight in the garden.

Everybody who has visited the village of L——will remember the old 'Pond Meeting House,' the rendezvous for all the young men and maidens in the neighborhood. It stood upon a small hill—a square white building with high wooden steps and green blinds—the Pond sparkling in the sunshine just across the road, the maple trees hanging their branches over the roof as if they loved it, and would shield it from all harm. At one side was a low shed where the horses stood, harnessed to their wagons, and switching their tails when the flies annoyed them, or when they thought [as they often had reason to think, poor things!] that the service was too long—at the other, a cool, green walk, leading out through the fields to the foot of the distant mountain. That walk had made more matches than all the old women in the country put together; it was quite impossible to enter it a dozen times without calling on the minister with a ring in your vest pocket soon afterwards. The very trees sung love songs as they waved to and fro, the birds paired sooner there than anywhere else, and there was the essence of flirtation in the very air you breathed. No one had better reason to believe this than Emily Thomson and her sister Nancy.—They had both been happy there, and as they drove up to the door of the meeting house with their parents on the Sunday morning after Helen's return, they looked first at the pretty grove, and then at two fine-looking young farmers who stood among the group on the steps in a way that spoke volumes. Old Farmer Thomson, however, was very strict in his notions of Sunday etiquette, and the rustic lovers were not help the girls from the wagon, though they did not fail to steal to their sides, as they stopped for a little chat with their old schoolmates and companions, before the bell rang them in and telled the minister to his pulpit.

It was a pretty sight, the white church among the trees, the smooth greensward before the door, the blue waters of the Pond, and the deeper blue of the far off hills. There is nothing like a summer Sunday morning in the country—nothing like the Sunday groups before the [illegible] church door. And so all the young people of L——seemed to think, as they crowded around the two sisters, leaving Miss Eunice to make big eyes on the outer edge of the circle.

'And so your cousin Helen has come home,' was the general exclamation. 'And is she well, and happy?'

Both, they believed, from all they saw.

'And John Moore will rest easy now, I hope,' said a gay young girl of sixteen. 'I am sure his poor horse must be glad she has come; we used to see him ride by our house towards the post-office every night, oh, so fast!'

Emily laughed.

'Has he seen her yet?' said her lover, bending down towards her.

'Yes, Walter,' she answered, with a ready blush that always came when she heard that voice. 'Do you think he would be all this while without calling? Why, she came on Friday evening.'

'And now it is Sunday morning—one day between. You see what is expected of you, Mr. Walter, if Emily ever goes away and thinks well enough of you to come back again,' said his sister, saucily.

'Yes, I see' But he did not look as if he should find it very hard to follow John's example.

'I hope those good people are not going to set us a city fashion by staying home from church,' said another girl. 'You have not told us, Emily, if Helen is coming.'

'Of course. She is to ride with John. I thought they would be here before this time, for he was driving that fast chestnut of his.'

Everybody smiled good-naturedly—they could fancy lovers lingering on the road, though a horse was ever so fast.

'That chestnut is a bad bargain; the very Evil One seems to be in him sometimes,' said a young farmer who had been listening to them.

'But, Walter, he goes very well when John is driving him,' said Emily suddenly, turning rather pale, as if an unwelcome thought had struck her.

'Aye, let John alone for driving horses—he soon makes them know their master.'

'Look, there he is!' said Eunice, pointing down the road. 'That is Helen! She has got on her new white bonnet with the apple blossoms inside!'

Everybody turned to look. Yes, there were the young couple—so handsome, so well matched, and so happy—seated side by side in a new covered-carriage, that John had just bought. The chesnut horse was dancing along sideways, with his ears lying close to his head, and lifting his slender feet high in the air, in a way that excited every one's admiration. Seeing the group of friends who were watching them, John took off his hat and swung it in the air; Helen leaned forward smiling, and waved her handkerchief. A little breeze, rising just then, took it out of her hand, and carried it right in the path of the chestnut horse. There was a start—a plunge—a kick, and they were off like the wind! John holding the reins in an iron grasp, Helen sitting beside him, white as death, but calm and still. For a moment the group at the church door gazed after them in horror; then Eunice cried out—

'Oh, He en will be killed! Helen will be killed!' And every one started and ran down the road—the minister, coming out of his gate, and hearing what had happened followed them.

They had not far to go. At the first turn of the road lay Helen, with a little stream of blood running from her temple.—A little further on John was just lifting his head to look around him; and the chestnut horse was speeding over the hill, a mile away, with the wreck of the carriage at his heels. John turned faint and staggered when they got him to his feet. His arm was broken, and there was a deep cut on the side of his face; but he dragged himself along to where Helen was lying, with her head in Emily's lap, and knelt down to look at her.

'Helen, my darling, are you hurt?' he murmured, faintly. There was no answer, and Emily ceased to chafe the cold hands in hers. John looked wonderingly around the group—there was not a dry eye there.

'What is it?' he asked, dreamily; and little Eunice broke out crying—

'Oh, Helen is dead, John! don't you see?'

'Dead! No! it cannot be. Helen love, don't you know me? He laid his cheek down to hers his broken arm hanging uselessly by his side, and strong young men turned away and wept like children. The old minister passed through the sobbing group, looked a moment at the pale face of the dead girl, and laid his hand solemnly on her lovers' head:

'My son, the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!'